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ROMAN OMENS, ROMAN AUDIENCES, AND ROMAN HISTORY

By PAULINE RIPAT

The role divination played in allocating, maintaining, and justifying the authority of the senatorial élite in the Republic has been well established.¹ Attention has also been paid to the use made of unofficial forms of divination by ambitious members of the ruling élite in the later Republic, who sought (often successfully) to make themselves pre-eminent before their peers by claiming personal divine attention.² What has received less attention in discussions of prophecy and authority is the role the general population of non-élites played in this ideological system which served the interests of the powerful rich, either collectively or individually, at the expense of the less powerful poor. The following seeks to begin to correct this oversight, as discussion of this factor is urgently needed if the observations just identified are to be considered sound. This is simply because authority, the

* Versions of this article were delivered as papers to the Classical Association of Canada in 2002 and to the Classics Department at the University of Waterloo in 2005. I am grateful to those audiences for their comments, and also to Mark Golden. Part of what follows is based on a discussion which originally appeared in my dissertation, *Prophecy and Policy in Roman Egypt* (Washington, 2003). Translations are my own.

¹ See, e.g. J. Linderski, 'Cicero and Roman Divination', PP 37 (1982); J. North, 'Diviners and Divination at Rome', in M. Beard and J. North (eds.) *Pagan Priests. Religion and Power in the Ancient World* (Ithaca, 1990), 65–71; R. Gordon, 'From Republic to Principate: Priesthood, Religion and Ideology', in M. Beard and J. North (eds.) (op. cit.), 192; T. P. Wiseman, 'Lucretius, Catiline and the Survival of Prophecy', *Ostraka* 1 (1992), 283. Note also Polyb. 6.56.6–12; Cic. *Div.* 1.89; Livy 1.20; Val. Max. 1.1.1, 1.2.1. By 'divination' here and in what follows, I mean all activities purported to be communication with the gods, whether solicited or unsolicited; cf. Cicero *Div.* 1.11–12. Note North's remarks (op. cit.), 57 about ancient use of the noun *divinatio*.

² E.g. North (n. 1); Linderski (n. 1), especially 16–22 and 35–37; E. Rawson, 'Caesar, Etruria, and the *Disciplina Etrusca*', in *Roman Culture and Society. Collected Papers* (Oxford, 1991), 289–323. Note Scipio Africanus (favoured by Jupiter): Val. Max. 1.2.2; Livy 26.19.5; Sulla (favoured by Fortuna, Trophonius, and Jupiter): Plut. *Sull.* 6.5–6, 17; Val. Max. 1.2.3; Marius (with personal medium, Martha): Plut. *Mar.* 17; Val. Max. 1.2.4; Sertorius (with prophetic doe): Val. Max. 1.2.5; Pliny *HN* 8.117. Cf. Suet. *Aug.* 94 and R. L. Wildfang, 'The Propaganda of Omens: Six Dreams Involving Augustus', in R. L. Wildfang and J. Isager (eds.), *Divination and Portents in the Roman World* (Denmark, 2000), 47. K. Hopkins, 'Divine Emperors or the Symbolic Unity of the Roman Empire', in *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge, 1978), 231–240 and D. Potter, *Prophets and Emperors* (Cambridge Mass., 1994), 146–182, discuss the claims made by emperors to the same effect. Note that Julius Caesar is somewhat unusual in that he was suspected of planning to manipulate an official form of divination, the Sibylline Books, for his own personal advancement (Suet. *Iul.* 79). See Wiseman (n. 1), 285, for P. Lentulus' lack of success in a similar capacity (Cic. *Cat.* 3.9; Sall. *Cat.* 47.2).

expected reward of élite claims of divine favouritism, can be neither universally shared nor coerced. It must be willingly granted to an individual or segment of society by an authority-lacking majority. Where divination is concerned, the identification of an occurrence as a 'real' divine message is subjective, and general concession to accept one person's (or one group's) claims about divination as true is a concession of real authority. In short, if élite claims of divine favouritism were made to impress the general population, the general population had to be impressed for the claims to be at all meaningful.³

Given that such claims continued to be made by members of the élite, we may assume that the population at large was impressed. However, it is not immediately obvious why. Members of all levels of Roman society, élite and non-élite alike, were constantly consulting the gods about private matters via unofficial methods of divination. The anecdotal evidence makes it clear that the purported divine responses to anxious individuals virtually formed the white background noise of the city.⁴ Everyone, it seems, could claim divine attention and consequently a measure of divine favouritism. We are left to wonder why it was an advantage to Scipio Africanus, for example, to claim Jupiter as a personal advisor if every Gaius Romanus was gaining favourable livers from the corner *haruspex*.⁵ Consideration of the responses of the collective élite to the divinatory activities of the *vulgus* – either the dismissal of personal and private religious rites as empty *superstitio* in times of stability, or sometimes active repression of the same in times of instability – sheds little light.⁶ Evidently neither dissuaded members of the general population from the idea that the gods might speak to them too, and thus did not

³ See Hopkins (n. 2), 198: 'political power and legitimacy rest not only in taxes and armies, but also in the perceptions and beliefs of men.' Potter (n. 2), 149, notes that the claimants' senatorial peers were for the most part unimpressed or making similar claims. The question of élite credulity or cynicism is irrelevant to the discussion at hand, nor, as Hopkins (n. 2), 217, pointed out with reference to convictions about the worship of emperors, 'does it matter much...We do not have to choose between politics and religion, between hypocrites and true believers.'

⁴ See e.g. Cato, *Agr.* 5.4; Plaut. *Asin.* 259, *Mostell.* 571; Pliny *HN* 2.5.21; Cic. *Div.* 1.3 (on divination undertaken both publice privatimque), 1.131 (quoting Pacuvius), 1.132 (quoting Ennius), 2.51 (citing Cato), cf. also 2.77 and 2.86. North (n. 1), 58–59, remarks upon the 'rich tradition' of private divination to which our sources testify obliquely (and usually describe negatively).

⁵ Livy 26.19.4; Gell. *NA* 6.1.6.

⁶ For the repression of unofficial religious activity, see e.g. Livy 25.1.6–12. Cicero (*Div.* 1.148–9) describes religious activity not undertaken by Roman authorities as *superstitio*. M. Beard, J. North, and S. Price (eds.), *Religions of Rome Vol. I* (Cambridge, 1998), 216–17, note that superstitious acts were 'often seen to be motivated by an inappropriate desire for knowledge,' making clear the close relationship between *superstitio* and divination.

result in élite monopoly over the actual activities of divine communication. Furthermore, it cannot have been, as David Potter has suggested regarding divination in the empire, that 'each individual made a choice as to what, if anything, could be believed.'⁷ If divine interpretation were a free-for-all, if the beliefs of individuals were uninfluenced by those of their fellows, and if each individual's judgement about divination carried equal weight, it is impossible to see what connection existed between prophecy and power at any point. Yet clearly the connection did exist, indicating that autonomous decisions by individuals were informed by dominant and common expectations of divination. Undoubtedly these originated from, and were disseminated by, members of the élite over the long expanse of Roman history; the result was a population of individuals who were willing to believe that the gods spoke to them and to their leaders, but not necessarily to their neighbours, their daughters, or their slaves. This produced the popular consensus necessary to make divination an avenue to legitimate political authority for members of the senatorial élite, but obviated the consensus necessary to do the same for the less illustrious.

The following seeks first to suggest the components of this system of belief, that is, the popular expectations of divination as encouraged by the élite. Attention is then given to the question of how deeply these expectations permeated popular thought and thus dictated popular understanding of political events. I suggest that the population at large was an active force behind the perpetuation of the system of belief which supported the legitimacy of Republican politicians, and eventually emperors. This participation is to be identified as both the repetition of stories that demonstrated the intimate relationship between the Roman élite and the Roman gods, and as the refashioning of past history to conform to popular expectations in this regard.

Roman Expectations of Divination

It is not possible to trace the development of the rather circular logic that underlay Roman understanding of divination; it is possible only to describe it as it had come to exist by the late Republic. Understanding appears to have rested upon four interdependent expectations.

⁷ Potter (n. 2), 3.

- i) *Divine messages are addressed to oneself, and are about one's own affairs*

While this statement is self-evident when speaking of solicited divination, such as questions put to an oracle or a dead spirit, it requires more explanation when speaking of self-offering messages from the gods, such as prodigies or omens. If a sacrificed ox is discovered to have no heart, for whom is such an incident significant? The meaning of an occurrence, which is potentially a divine message, is to be understood in the context of oneself and one's immediate concerns. This is true even if one is not the direct recipient of the portent or omen in question. The story of Lucius Paulus and his daughter Tertia is to be understood in this self-interested light. Cicero relates the tale as an example of a well-known omen:⁸ Paulus, consul for the second time, had just returned home after receiving the command of the war against King Perseus. As he greeted his little daughter Tertia, he noticed that she was rather sad. He inquired kindly as to the cause, to which she responded that Persa, her little dog, had died. Embracing her a bit more tightly, Paulus bravely pronounced that he accepted the sign ('*accipio*' inquit, '*mea filia, omen.*'). While this story must surely be suspected as an after-the-fact fiction, it nonetheless provides a very good illustration of how omens were supposed to work. The story begins with a little girl whose dog has died and her father's benevolent concern for her feelings. But a dramatic shift takes place when the pieces fall together for Paulus, who has not lost a dog and is not feeling particularly sad – but for a little hug (*arctius puellam complexus*), Tertia and her dead animal are all but forgotten by Paulus: they are not the issue, they merely comprise a *sign meant for himself*.

We might also consider the many prodigious births reported by Livy, such as the birth of hermaphrodites amongst the Sabines (31.12.6), a two-headed boy in Veii, a one-handed boy in Sinuessa, or a girl with teeth at Auximum (41.21.12). It is possible that the respective parents understood these births as ominous for themselves or their families. However, when these births were reported to the Senate in Rome, they were understood as special messages for the Roman state and for those who controlled it, the Senate. The fact that these

⁸ Cic. *Div.* 1.103; cf. 2.83 and Val. Max. 1.5.3. The following makes much use of examples extracted from Cicero's *De divinatione*, in which they were deployed to build cases for and against divination. As Cicero uses well-known examples from Roman history, it is possible to use them as evidence for popular stories, rather than merely to consider them as philosophical devices.

omens survive in historical record indicates that the Senate's interpretation became dominant. But it remains to be seen why such omens 'in truth' would have been about the welfare of the Roman state rather than the welfare of the children's respective families, or why Tertia's dead dog would have dictated her father's victory more than, say, her own future ill-luck with small animals. In short, when so many personal interpretations were possible, what made one 'true' and rendered the others 'false'? The answer lies in the second expectation of divination.

- ii) *Divine messages are about one's own affairs, provided one is the worthiest recipient*

Cicero (*Div.* 2.59) is instructive on this point, ironically in the course of his derision of Stoic logic concerning divination.⁹ He mocks Stoic insistence that natural occurrences had deeper significance; on that reasoning, he says, perhaps he should be concerned for the Roman Republic, since mice just nibbled his copy of Plato's *Respublica*.¹⁰ Given that he was writing this in the later half of 44 BC, Cicero here provides a better case for portents than he would have liked, unless this is to be understood as his little joke. If such is the case, then it is an unexpected visit of Cicero's tongue to his cheek, particularly considering that the subject matter is his beloved *Respublica*. In fact this is the critical point: there never was a more ardent lover or staunch defender of the Republic than Cicero himself, especially in his own estimation.¹¹ If divination were possible, if the gods were to send messages, there could be no more suitable person to receive a warning about danger to the Republic than Cicero himself. This is simply because self-offering signs were expected to be sent to the person in the best position and with the greatest responsibility to act upon the message, that is, the person with the most real power and influence. Though messengers of divine messages could come – and often did – in unexpected forms, such as two-headed children, talking cows, or, as in this example, nibbling mice, the *addressee* of a divine

⁹ On the problem of identifying Cicero's views in the *De divinatione*, see M. Beard, 'Cicero and Divination: the Formation of a Latin Discourse', *JRS* 76 (1986), 33–46 and M. Schofield, 'Cicero for and against Divination', *JRS* 76 (1986), 47–65. Regardless of whether Cicero personally believed the views espoused by the interlocutor 'Marcus', the details and examples Cicero chooses to expound a philosophical point can nonetheless be telling of general assumptions about divination, as is the case in what follows.

¹⁰ Cf. also Linderski (n. 1), 13.

¹¹ See e.g. Cicero's response in *Har. Resp.* 8.17 to Clodius' question *cuius civitatis es?* Cicero tells us *respondi me...eius esse quae carere me non potuisset*.

message could not be of similarly unexpected status.¹² Thus, and ideally, social inferiors ought to recognize themselves as mere messengers, not recipients, of divine messages, which were to be passed up the chain of command to their true addressees. The direction of the flow of information reinforced and justified established hierarchies, and any purported messages which did not ultimately find their way into the hands of a male of the Roman élite were dismissed by the same as mere pretences, that is, examples of empty *superstitio*.¹³

To return to the example of Tertia and Paulus, it becomes clear why the dog and the daughter are mere messengers rather than the intended recipients: there is no question who wields the most real power of the three, and so the message is for Paulus as the *paterfamilias* and military general. Other instructive tales of social inferiors surrendering signs to their superiors existed for Roman posterity to contemplate. Cicero (*Div.* 1.4, 1.99) relates the example of Caecilia, the daughter the consul of 123 BC, Q. Caecilius Metellus Balearicus, who dutifully passed her dream of Juno Sospita on to the Senate. Perhaps more famous was the often repeated incident involving a certain T. Latinius, a Roman of mean origin who was too humble, too cowed, and too overwhelmed to pass on a dream he received from Jupiter to the Senate, until the gods eventually convinced him to do so by crippling him and killing his son.¹⁴

However, we must suspect that some were less willing to hand their signs over to their betters. Tacitus (*Hist.* 5.13) testily remarks upon the *mos humanae cupidinis* of succumbing to delusions of grandeur where divine signs were concerned, a characteristic which led common people to imagine great destinies for themselves. In Roman opinion, foreigners were particularly bad at conforming to the Roman model of proper behaviour, as they often fancied themselves to be the recipients of omens which were either no omens at all, or which were

¹² See R. Parker, 'Greek States and Greek Oracles', in P. A. Cartledge and F. D. Harvey (eds.) *Crux. Essays in Greek History Presented to G.E.M. de Ste. Croix* (London, 1985), 300–1, for the necessity that divination present a kind of 'resistance to the understanding' to be deemed objective and hence credible. Along similar lines is Cicero's observation (*Div.* 2.61–2) that prodigies were defined by many as events in nature that were naturally impossible.

¹³ North (n. 1), 68: 'One of the effects of the system of divination in the Republican situation was to serve as a marker of the location of power.' It seems women could legitimately expect divine messages about feminine affairs, such as matchmaking; see Cic. *Div.* 1.104 and S. Treggiari, *Roman Marriage* (Oxford, 1991), 125–7. Note, however, that Cicero (*Div.* 1.105) says that these sorts of divine missives might be scorned (*posse contemni vel etiam rideri*).

¹⁴ Cicero (*Div.* 1.55) records the tale and says that many others did as well (*omnes...historici, Fabii, Gellii, sed proxime Coelius*); see also Livy 2.36.2–8; Dion. Hal. 7.68; Val. Max. 1.7.4.

really meant for their Roman conquerors.¹⁵ It seems possible that some Romans too might have competed with their social superiors for the position of recipient, or might have offered alternate interpretations of divine messages. But in the Republic we really only hear of Romans who were already well-positioned challenging their peers' authority with claims of divine favouritism or predestination.¹⁶ Contestants from the Roman non-élite are almost entirely absent from the historical record, and in contrast to foreign insurgents, are never specifically named.¹⁷ Furthermore, the number of memorable tug-of-wars between élite and non-élite over divine signs are exceptionally few, particularly in comparison with the number of divine messages received. Senatorial assumption of prodigies within the city of Rome or on *ager publicus*, for example, appears to have been undisputed. No beleaguered inhabitant of the Aventine Hill is on record claiming that the shower of stones this neighbourhood experienced in 216 BC was meant for him rather than for the state; the families of the men electrocuted by lightening in the Campus Martius that same year did not challenge the Senate for the right to that prodigy; Marcus Valerius, residing on *ager publicus* in Calatia in 167 BC was happy, we are left to assume, to hand over his blood-dripping hearth to the Roman authorities to deal with.¹⁸

Nevertheless, in light of the expectation that all members of all levels of society consulted the gods as a regular matter of course, it seems unlikely that no alternative interpretations or competing bids were laid upon these occurrences by their initial recipients. It must be admitted that a prodigy, a dire message from the divine, was no doubt a hot potato most people would prefer to pass on rather than claim.

¹⁵ Tacitus made his remark in reference to the Jewish population, but we might recall the prophetic claims ascribed to Syrus, the fomentor of a slave revolt in Sicily, to Spartacus, and to the *graeus ignobilis* in the Bacchanalian affair of 186 BC; on these incidents, see Livy 39.8; Diod. Sic. 34/35.2.5–10, 36.4.4; Plut. *Crass.* 8.3. See also K. Bradley, *Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World* (Indiana, 1989), 113–15.

¹⁶ See Wiseman (n. 1), 285, on Marius and Lentulus; cf. also North (n. 1), 68–70, and Linderski (n. 1), 36.

¹⁷ See e.g. Livy 25.1.6–12, when the events of the Hannibalic War drove a terrified Roman population (particularly the *rustica plebs* and women, considered to be the most gullible and superstitious elements of Roman society) to listen to the advice of petty priests and seers (*sacrificuli* and *vates*). Though Livy focuses on the foreignness of the rites (*externus ritus*), the point is probably that the rites were not traditional (i.e. were not overseen by the Senate) rather than foreign, and it may well have been that the *sacrificuli* and *vates* were homegrown. Note that members of the Roman population (especially women, and men who were *simillimi feminis*) were also said to be adherents (though not leaders) of the Bacchanalian rites which caused a stir in 186 BC; see Livy 39.13.

¹⁸ Livy 22.36.7–9, 45.16.5; for other examples of prodigies taken on by the Senate, see Cic. *Div.* 1.97–8; Val. Max. 1.6.5–6; Pliny *HN* 2.57.147.

At first blush, the Senate seems generous in agreeing to shoulder the responsibility for such dreadful signs. But the benign acceptance of responsibility has as its self-interested flipside the exertion of influence, and we must suspect that signs were hijacked by the Senate as prodigies as often as they were offered to it.¹⁹ The identification of a sign as positive or negative in the first place is a matter of interpretation. One person's dire prodigy could be another person's good omen, as Anchises demonstrated when he correctly interpreted Iulus' blazing head as a positive sign.²⁰ It may well have been the case, for example, that Marcus Valerius interpreted his blood-dripping hearth to indicate some kind of personal military success in the future. But there can be no doubt that as far as the Senate was concerned these sorts of personal interpretations would be neither admitted nor supported: good omens for unremarkable individuals would lend them undue importance, and would, in addition, remove a chance for the Senate to display its responsibility, as the true addressee of the message, to see to the religious health of the community (and consequently to justify its religious and political power over it). The critical point, however, is that even if there were competing interpretations of prodigies, it was the Senate's interpretation that won the most approval and which we consequently hear. This brings us to a third point about the expectations of divination.

iii) *The recipient's power lends authority to the interpretation of a divine message, or increases the perceived reliability of a medium*

This statement is somewhat self-evident in a state such as Republican Rome, which employed official forms of divination, all undertaken and interpreted by state magistrates and priests. We have just seen the Senate assume the right to categorize and interpret signs, as the most authoritative element of any possible relationship in Republican Roman society, and we must assume that the lack of competing interpretations in the historical record suggests not that such never existed, but that they were given less popular credit than the interpretations of

¹⁹ Livy (43.13.6) suggests that prodigies which occurred on private or foreign land were not accepted by the Senate, which might imply that the long arm of the Senate knew its religious boundaries; however, it is quite clear that the Senate often accepted prodigies which had not occurred on public land under Roman authority. See E. Rawson, 'Prodigy Lists and the Use of the *Annales Maximae*', in *Roman Culture and Society. Collected Papers* (Oxford, 1991), 1–15, and J. North, 'Religion and Politics, from Republic to Empire', *JRS* 76 (1986), 255, for varying opinions, discussion, and examples.

²⁰ Verg. *Aen.* 2.679–91; cf. Cic. *Div.* 2.144–5.

the Senate.²¹ It is furthermore likely that in matters of identifying and interpreting divine messages, individual members of the senatorial élite were conferred with the authority granted to the body as a whole by the general population. But it is not necessary to infer this pattern. Blatant statements exist to the effect that the patronage of famous or powerful Roman men granted authority to an oracle, and that lack of such patronage removed it. For example, Cicero (*Div.* 2.86–7) asserts that the lot oracle at Praeneste, and indeed lot oracles in general, are considered to be all but defunct. His reason is not that no one ever consults them, for surely the *vulgus* does; but what person of any importance ever uses lot oracles (*quis enim magistratus aut quis vir illustrior utitur sortibus*)? This reason alone is proof enough for Cicero, and perhaps others like him, that everyone finds lot divination ridiculous (*hoc quidem genus divinationis vita iam communis explosit*).²²

However, while the élite might consider not the numbers but the status of patrons as the deciding factor which granted credibility to a form of divination or withheld it, it is not immediately certain that the maligned *vulgus* was party to the same reasoning. The unillustrious throngs frequented unofficial oracle sites, evidently oblivious or unconcerned that they had been pronounced untruthful by members of the Roman élite. But it is unlikely that the non-élite were entirely or even mostly impartial to élite logic in this regard: while illustrious endorsement of an oracle site was not necessary for its popular success, it certainly helped. This is surely the only reason to keep the dice used by the emperor Tiberius on display at the oracle of Heracles, as Suetonius reports (*Tib.* 14.2). As for the lots at Praeneste, it was probably their history, if not their present enjoyment, of weighty patronage that convinced many of their reliability. The legend of the foundation of the oracle site contains a vital detail: Numerius Suffustius, the unfortunate man harassed by dreams to find the Praenestian lots within an improbable rock, was of noble birth

²¹ That a person's social prominence lent authority to his interpretation of a message, or credibility to his role as messenger, is further suggested by the credence given by the Senate to its own spontaneously prophetic members. See Wiseman (n. 1), 280–1, 285 for examples.

²² Note also Roman treatment of Delphi; though the oracle was consulted at times in the early and middle Republic by the Senate, no consultations took place after Greece became a political appendage of Rome. On the last consultations of the Senate in the Republic, see Potter (n. 2), 63–4 and S. Levin, 'The Old Greek Oracles in Decline', *ANRW* II 18.2 (1989), 1601. Although the official line appears to have been that the Senate no longer consulted Delphi because the oracle was no longer truthful, it seems likely that the oracle was no longer deemed truthful because important persons (such as Senators) no longer consulted it about important matters; see Cic. *Div.* 1.37–8; Plut. *de Pyth. Or.* 407 C–E.

(*honestus homo et nobilis*).²³ But the lots' most illustrious patron was unquestionably the dictator Sulla, who famously expanded the site.²⁴

Furthermore, the expectation that illustrious and powerful men lent authority to a message or medium is surely the reason why figures of that ilk often made cameo appearances in tales of prophetic events. The best examples are to be found in the anecdotes of omens portending Augustus' future greatness.²⁵ In addition to a variety of wonders that surrounded his birth are the more interesting and clearly apocryphal tales of political figures of the day receiving and autonomously interpreting divine messages about the as-yet-undistinguished Octavian. P. Nigidius Figulus spontaneously declared to the Senate that Octavian's father was late for the meeting because he had been delayed by the birth of the future world ruler, his son; Q. Catulus and Cicero were visited by dreams in which a boy, identified by each as Octavian upon their first introduction, was engaged in activities with Jupiter. But these yarns cannot be true. The incident featuring Figulus, who was chosen for his reputed familiarity with the occult as much as his identity as a Senator,²⁶ supposedly took place on the day the Senate was meeting about the Catilinarian conspiracy. It is thus difficult to say whether such a pronouncement to the Senate about the birth of the future world ruler, had it been made, could be better qualified as the height of providence or the height of bad taste. Catulus died when Octavian was only two years old, probably too young to be introduced to elderly statesmen; Cicero never mentions having had such a prophetic dream, though one scholar has observed that the claim would have served him well in the *Philippics* if he had had it.²⁷ These men figure in the telling only because they lend the stories a measure of their own authority.²⁸

Surely members of the élite lent credibility to purported divine communications because of a sense that those who received messages so often would be best practiced at picking out the 'true' ones from

²³ Cic. *Div.* 2.85; cf. 1.89 for the description of the Marcii, authors of prophetic books, as *nobili loco nati*.

²⁴ The lots did not experience unmitigated respect from the Senate; see Val. Max. 1.3.2.

²⁵ The following anecdotes are to be found in Suet. *Aug.* 94; cf. Dio 45.2.2–5. See Wildfang (n. 2) for the argument that some of the stories originated from a source close to Augustus.

²⁶ On Figulus, see Beard, North and Price (eds.) (n.6), 153; Rawson (n. 2), 299.

²⁷ See J. Carter, *Suetonius: Divus Augustus* (Bristol, 1982), 202, on these anecdotes; for skepticism about prophetic dreams in particular, see Cic. *Div.* 2.27.

²⁸ Particularly in their capacity as doughty Republicans. Note that Julius Caesar is also supposed to have interpreted spontaneous tree-growth as a positive sign for Octavian, which made him desire no other as heir (Suet. *Aug.* 94). Compare also the story of the oracle Augustus' father received at the oracle of Liber in Thrace, once patronized by Alexander the Great (Suet. *Aug.* 94).

the ‘false,’ and interpreting the former correctly. But a spin-off effect was certainly also a general expectation that these same people were consequently the best informed about important matters, present and future. This introduces the fourth and final expectation about divination.

iv) *Political leaders with legitimate power are foresighted*

Though modern scholars debate the actual function of divination, it is clear that, in the later Republic at least, the Romans themselves thought that divination could give information about future events.²⁹ Therefore, politicians who held power legitimately, which resulted in, and was proved by, their privileged relationship with the gods, ought to have been foresighted about future events rather than surprised; conversely, knowing what would happen next could translate into **political authority**. Cato the Younger is repeatedly praised by Plutarch for his almost prophetic abilities, while Pompey’s memory as a worthy general was honoured by stories in which he correctly interpreted the signs which foretold his own death.³⁰ It is certainly no accident that **providentia was to become one of the most commonly claimed imperial virtues**.³¹

However, knowing what would happen is surely just the impression left by someone who knew what to do next, and thus Cicero, who insisted that foresight was the result of industriousness rather than divine fleas in the ear, was anxious to remain one step ahead of the political events in Rome even in his absence.³² But the general population was less concerned to make the distinction between industriousness and divine guidance in matters of providence, as witnessed by the rough handling of those men whose cavalier attitude towards omens and prodigies resulted in great losses for the state. Notorious examples circulated, for example, Publius Claudius’ ejection of the uncooperative state chickens from his ship and the subsequent loss of his fleet in the first Punic War, and Gaius

²⁹ See North (n. 1), 60–1, and N. Denyer, ‘The Case against Divination: An Examination of Cicero’s *De Divinatione*’, *PCPhS* 31 (1985), 5.

³⁰ Plut. *Cato* 35, 52; *Pomp.* 48, 60, 68; *Val. Max.* 1.5.6, cf. 1.6.12.

³¹ See C. Noreña, ‘The Communication of the Emperor’s Virtues’, *JRS* 91 (2001), 159, for the use of *providentia* on imperial coinage. He remarks: ‘[p]rovidentia, a Latin translation of the Greek *pronoia*, the divine providence that ordered the world according to Stoic doctrine, came by the late Republic to refer specifically to the foresight required to safeguard the state.’

³² For **Cicero’s obsession with political foresight**, see e.g. *Div.* 1.111, *Fam.* 2.8.1–2, 6.6 (in which Cicero makes explicit comparison between state diviners and his own political providence, a talent he makes much of in the first Catilinarian); cf. *Brut.* 1.15.9, in which he urges Brutus to achieve the same quality.

Flamininus' failure to give proper heed to his horse's lack of coordination and the consequences paid by his soldiers in the second Punic War.³³ Such stories demonstrate that the disappointment felt in an unsuccessful leader often manifested itself as the belief that such men were abusers of the very relationship which had justified their power in the first place: such men ought to have been foresighted, but in their arrogance, were not.

In short, Roman expectations of divination were generally that the Roman gods sent messages to the most appropriate recipients; that the Roman gods sent messages about matters which affected the community as a whole, and members of the senatorial élite were the most appropriate recipients of such messages; that if there were competing interpretations about the meaning or intended addressee of a message, the claims of the more prominent party prevailed; and finally, that men in leading positions were provident as a consequence of their regular communication with the Roman gods.

Roman Audiences and Roman History

The system of understanding just described clearly benefited members of the political élite, but it required the willing cooperation of the non-élite for the system to be at all meaningful. We can already posit passive compliance by pointing to the general lack of competing claims made by non-élite individuals: members of the general population were evidently not usually willing to entertain the assertions of their peers over those of their social superiors in sufficient numbers to cause an historically-detectable ruffle.³⁴ But evidence of active cooperation could be detected in the rumours which sprung up spontaneously and echoed the assumptions about divination just outlined. Such activity reflected, reinforced, and perpetuated the same expectations by furnishing 'proof' of their veracity.³⁵ Not all rumours about divine messages will suit this investigation, however. Many stories

³³ Cic. *Div.* 1.28–9, 77, *Nat. D.* 2.7–8; Livy 22.3.11; Val. Max. 1.4.3–4, 1.6.6; cf. tales about Crassus: Cic. *Div.* 1.29; Val. Max. 1.6.11; Plut. *Crass.* 18.

³⁴ Except in situations in which the leadership of the Senate was already in question, it seems; see Livy 25.1.6–12 and (n. 17).

³⁵ North (n. 1), 60, observes half of this relationship: 'bogus oracles are just as good evidence as "real" ones of contemporary expectations.' V. Hunter, 'Gossip and the Politics of Reputation in Classical Athens', *Phoenix* 44 (1990), 307, notes the nature of gossip is to shape events to conform to 'familiar patterns' and 'established structures'. See G. W. Allport and L. Postman, 'The Analysis of Rumour', in G. W. Allport *Personality and Social Encounter. Selected Essays* (Boston, 1960), 312–17 on the factors which shape rumours.

evidently did not spring up spontaneously, but rather stemmed from the persons who figured as their focuses, or from sources close to them. Freedmen were regular disseminators; friends could also perform this service, and it seems that those stories whose source could be named were recognized, though perhaps naively, as more immediately credible than their sourceless counterparts.³⁶ Omens signalling the death of important men offer better examples. Such purported events lent authority to the person at their centre, as they implied that the person was important enough for his death to qualify as a calamity for the state, and thus for the gods to send notification; they are also stories whose source was less likely to be the recipient of the omen for the obvious reason that he was already dead.³⁷ However, examples must still be carefully selected. The observation that Gaius Gracchus was the source of the story that ominous serpents portended his father's death serves as warning that omens might be advertised by a surviving heir in a bid to transfer the dead man's authority to himself, an act that foreshadowed the claim of being *divi filius*.³⁸

With this caveat in mind, it is surprising to note that the stories surrounding Caesar's death offer the best opportunity to watch popular expectations at work. Though the death omens of other leading men could be examined, the number of discussions of Caesar's murder (and the list of supposed events which foreshadowed it) far exceed those of the death of any other.³⁹ No fewer than eight extant authors mention his omens, in addition to countless others that did not survive, but to whom our sources allude.⁴⁰ Of the numerous omens which were said to precede Caesar's death, only one might be suspected to stem from Octavian, who really could claim to be *divi filius* after 42 BC.⁴¹ Though it is of course possible that the authors of

³⁶ See e.g. Cicero's and Augustus' use of freedmen: Cic. *Div.* 1.58–9 (cf. Val. Max. 1.7.5); Suet. *Aug.* 94.3–4 (cf. 79.2), on which see Wildfang (n. 2), 47; Sulla recorded his own evidence of divine favour in his memoirs: Plut. *Sull.* 6.5–6, 17 (cf. Val. Max. 1.2.3); Balbus reported one of Julius Caesar's death omens, which Suetonius then considers to be unassailably credible (*Iul.* 81). Note that ancient opinions of Balbus and his relationship to Caesar differ; cf. Plut. *Caes.* 60; Vell. Pat. 2.51.3.

³⁷ Compare, however, Gaius Gracchus' death omens, received in the form of visitations by his dead brother in dreams; Gracchus himself is said to have been the source (Cic. *Div.* 1.56; Val. Max. 1.7.6).

³⁸ Cic. *Div.* 1.36; cf. Plut. *Ti. Gracch.* 1.

³⁹ E.g. Tiberius Gracchus: Val. Max. 1.6.8; Crassus: Cic. *Div.* 1.29; Val. Max. 1.6.11; Plut. *Crass.* 18; Pompey: Val. Max. 1.5.6, 1.6.12; Plut. *Pomp.* 68; cf. Cic. *Div.* 2.22; Cicero: Val. Max. 1.4.6; Plut. *Cic.* 47; App. *B Civ.* 4.19–20.

⁴⁰ Cicero *Div.* 1.119, 2.23, 36–7; Val. Max. 1.6.13, 1.7.2; Vell. Pat. 2.57.2; Pliny the Elder *HN* 11.186; Plut. *Caes.* 63–5; Suet. *Iul.* 77, 81; App. *B Civ.* 2.116; Dio 44.17.

⁴¹ Calpurnia's dream, discussed below (n. 50).

our literary sources were themselves responsible for shaping the stories they report rather than conveying popular opinion, the suggestion is not persuasive in light of the repeated inclusion of specific sources of information, or more general statements to the effect that information has been passed along to them.⁴² It is also clear that the historians upon whom our extant sources often depend were themselves ready to incorporate hearsay into their narratives.⁴³ We unfortunately cannot know the order in which elements were shaped, added, or removed to create not just a better story, but also a history of events which was more popularly believable than the actual events – it is possible, for example, that the anecdotes Dio preserves were current earlier than those Suetonius mentions. Nevertheless, by considering the surviving tales of Caesar's death omens all together, it is possible to get an impression of the vitality of popular rumour and of the themes which were considered to be necessary inclusions.⁴⁴

Cicero provides the earliest account of Caesar's death omens in the *De divinatione*, written in the months following the murder, and his account is therefore probably the closest to the truth.⁴⁵ He imparts three pieces of information: first, astrologers had predicted a long life to Caesar (as they also had to Pompey and Crassus); second, at the Lupercalia in mid-February of 44 BC, Caesar's sacrificial victim had lacked a heart, a sign which Spurinna the haruspex had interpreted as ill-omened for Caesar's intellect and life (and that the next day, the upper lobe of the liver was missing from another victim);⁴⁶ and third, Caesar had not known how, where, when, or by whose hands he would die (Cicero comments upon how miserable Caesar would have been had he known this information).⁴⁷ There is not a breath of

⁴² E.g. Val. Max. 1.6.13; Plut. *Caes.* 63; Dio 53.19; Suet. *Iul.* 81. For Suetonius as a reporter rather than an interpreter of his sources, see A. Wallace Hadrill, *Suetonius. The Scholar and His Caesars* (New Haven, 1984), 21; he also notes (56–7) that Suetonius was best informed about the Ciceronian and Augustan periods.

⁴³ E.g. Cic. *Div.* 1.56; Val. Max. 1.7.6; Suet. *Iul.* 77; Plut. *Caes.* 32, 47, 63.

⁴⁴ Allport and Postman (n. 35), 317, note that successful rumours must present a narrative of events which is deemed conceivable.

⁴⁵ Cf. Rawson (n. 2), 307.

⁴⁶ See H. Eröksüz, N. Metin, and Y. Eröksüz, 'Total Pectoral Ectopia Cordis and Other Congenital Malformations in a Calf', *Veterinarian Record* 142 (16) (1998), 437. The authors observe that 'total or partial displacement of the heart from the thoracic cavity' is a rare, but not unheard of condition in cattle, with 'a total of 110 cases of bovine ectopia cordis...reported worldwide until 1986.' Cf. J. R. Dalton, 'Ectopia Cordis in Cattle', *Veterinarian Record* 142 (16) (1998), 616, where it is suggested that the incidence of this condition is much higher than is reported. I am grateful to Susan Downie for her help in locating these sources.

⁴⁷ Cic. *Div.* 2.99 (Chaldaeans), 1.119, 2.36–7 (heartless ox, cf. Pliny *HN* 11.186, who takes up the physiological debate), 2.23 (the misery which would have been Caesar's had he known what the future held). Rawson (n. 2) discusses the possibilities of Spurinna's identity, the specifics of his occupation, and his possible connections with Caesar.

suggestion about the other ominous elements which would figure in later tellings, and thus we must assume that these had yet to take on a credible life of their own – it seems likely that Cicero could have used many of them to advantage in his discussion of divination had they been available to him.

It is evident that this bland version of events, starring a Caesar blissful in his ignorance, was popularly insupportable in its near-complete failure to conform to established expectations. Caesar was the single most powerful man in all of Rome, and his death impacted upon the life of the political community in epic proportions. For those engaging in hindsight contemplation, it would have been inconceivable that Caesar's murder could have been signalled by the Roman gods only once, by an ill-timed ox suggesting senility, or possibly death, in imprecise detail; such a momentous event would have had to have been signalled many times and in no uncertain terms. And of course, Caesar himself would have to have known about it – his political legitimacy (and that of his currently powerful successors) must otherwise be called into question.

To judge by the information available to Valerius Maximus and Velleius Paterculus, it was not long before Roman memory had rectified the situation.⁴⁸ Valerius Maximus suggests that the heartless victim and Caesar's murder occurred in rapid succession (1.6.13),⁴⁹ and that Spurinna had identified the fateful day as the Ides of March (8.11.2). Velleius Paterculus (2.57.2), on the other hand, skips the ox but reports that unnamed soothsayers had confidently named the Ides. Both include a prophetic dream Calpurnia was now purported to have had. Valerius Maximus' account (1.7.2) is the more specific: Calpurnia dreamed that she held Caesar, stabbed, in her arms.⁵⁰ For Velleius Paterculus (2.57.2), the dream is merely terrifying – but it is enough: Caesar, now better advised in greater specificity about his imminent demise, was understandably hesitant to leave his house that morning to attend the meeting of the Senate, though leave he does. Velleius Paterculus adds one extra detail, which could be accurate, or could be understood as a mundane variation on the divinatory theme

⁴⁸ Cf. Rawson (n. 2), 308–9, who is willing to accept that the story of Caesar's ill-omens may have been elaborated, but who implies that added details are to be credited to the authors who report them.

⁴⁹ Note especially his use of *eo die quo* and *deinde*.

⁵⁰ Calpurnia's dream might be suspected as a rumour spread by Octavian, or a source close to him, in light of the fact that Valerius Maximus mentions it specifically as a reason why Octavian was willing to be convinced by his doctor's dream to fail to attend the battle of Philippi (Val. Max. 1.7.2); cf. Plut. *Brut.* 41 and Vell. Pat. 2.57, 2.70, who do not link the two dreams.

that information is to be sent along to its appropriate recipient: notes were passed to Caesar warning him of the conspiracy, but he did not read them in time.

Plutarch (*Caes.* 63–4) addresses similar themes.⁵¹ He reports variations, however, which suggests that doubt existed – not about the veracity of the revised history, but rather about its precise detail. For example, it might have been Brutus' friend Artemidorus who passed on the note to Caesar, or it could have been someone else. Calpurnia dreamed that Caesar lay stabbed in her arms, though others say that she dreamed instead that an honorific gable decoration voted to Caesar fell and smashed. In any case, Caesar was in no doubt that his wife was suffering from nightmares, since the windows suddenly flapped open and woke him up, making it possible for him to observe her troubled sleep. Spurinna is removed from the duty of interpreting the heartless ox (which is still mentioned), and an anonymous seer is given the job of naming the fateful day. Ominous birds on the morning of the Ides and apparitions of men on fire round off the list. We now discover that the finger has been pointed at Decimus Brutus, a conspirator and faithless heir of Caesar's, as the person who convinced Caesar to leave the house against his better judgement on the fateful day.

Suetonius (*Iul.* 81) records yet other traditions (horses cried in the Rubicon valley, and Balbus reported that tablet in a tomb in Capua had been found, which cryptically foretold the murder) and reiterates now well-established themes (e.g. an unknown person handed Caesar a note). He also includes some clarifications, for example, ominous birds fought in the theatre of Pompey, and Calpurnia's dream was reconciled into a single, concise nightmare (the emblem smashed and Caesar lay in her arms, stabbed to death). Caesar was not awake to witness his wife's tossing and turning, however, as he was having a significant dream of his own: he was shaking hands with Jupiter – a detail which suggests a date after 42 BC for this branch of the rumour. Though Suetonius is certainly aware of Caesar's heartless victim (*Iul.* 77), he does not explicitly link the sign to Caesar's murder, suggesting possibly that not everyone did; he instead records the event and Caesar's witty remark about it as an illustration of his arrogance. But in lieu of the ox, there were still other unfavourable victims which ushered Caesar into the Senate house on the Ides of March, the day

⁵¹ It is possible that Plutarch's sources were contemporary with, or even earlier than, Velleius Paterculus and Valerius Maximus, but there is no way of knowing for certain. One of his sources, Strabo, a philosopher of unknown date, is mentioned again in *Luc.* 28.7.

identified by Spurinna, and Decimus Brutus is once again the villain who convinced Caesar to leave the safety of his own home.

Appian (*B Civ.* 2.166) reports a neat arrangement of details, which provide a very clean account of Caesar's murder. Though many had suggested that Caesar had received unfavourable signs on the morning of the Ides, Appian, like Valerius Maximus, informs us that the unfavourable omen was none other than the famous heartless ox (or possibly the lobeless-livered ox). Caesar was unperturbed by this sign, stating merely that he had had one of the heartless varieties before, back in Spain. His inability to gain any victims which were more favourable did unsettle him, but he boldly set aside his misgivings and entered into the Senate to meet his throng of murderers. No fewer than three people tried to pass him information about his fate – Artemidorus, another friend, and an unknown third who succeeded in giving Caesar the note, but not in getting him to read it in time.

Dio (44.17), on the other hand, dispenses with the heartless victim entirely, stating merely that there were ill bird signs and unpropitious sacrifices on the morning of the Ides before Caesar left the house. An unnamed seer appears as the predictor of the Ides to supplement Calpurnia's bad dream (the single combination), Caesar's good dream (shaking hands with Jupiter) and (a novelty) the clanging of Mars' weapons in the night. Dio includes an extra flourish to the treacherous encouragement of Decimus Brutus on the fateful morning: a statue of Caesar breaks when Caesar allows himself to be convinced to leave the house.

When these stories are considered together, we can trace general editorial patterns as the story was bent and pressed to fit the mould of expectation: the original ox, an omen of general meaning (possible death – but where, when, how?), though showy, was less preferred by some to signs of certain implication (Calpurnia dreaming of a stabbed Caesar, statues of Caesar breaking at critical times), and other purported omens (such as unfavourable bird signs) gained significant details (birds fighting in Pompey's theatre). When the heartless victim remained in the story, the timing of its appearance was moved out of the Lupercalia and closer to the murder, so that it might serve as a more immediate sign of imminent disaster, dampening the inadmissible detail that the Roman gods had displayed shoddy timing in sending a sign that portended catastrophe for the Roman community. This original state of affairs was further buried beneath an accretion of ever more numerous omens, requiring Spurinna (who was sometimes multiplied into a chorus of anonymous seers) to perform two

separate duties, at times interpreting the ox, and at other times identifying the Ides.

However, the recreation of Caesar's murder, complete with his necessary foreknowledge, does not seem to be without its problems. The result – Caesar, hesitating at his threshold because the birds that morning were ill-omened, Caesar, given pause because his wife had had bad dreams – jars with the more historical Caesar of Cicero, who was unconcerned even when faced with a heartless ox.⁵² Nor was Caesar's cavalier attitude towards ill-omens and evil prodigies altogether forgotten by posterity; Suetonius (*Iul.* 59) describes him, for example, as undeterred by any religious exigency (*ulla...religione*).⁵³ This historical Caesar finds his way into many tellings of his death too, resulting in an internally inconsistent narrative: once he was convinced to leave the safety of his house, Caesar is said to have ridiculed Spurinna as a false prophet as he strode confidently into the Senate house, evidently having shed his prudent concern for his life at some point along the way.⁵⁴ The self-contradictory impression of Caesar which results could suggest that our authors consulted chronologically eclectic source material. Nevertheless, it is evident that Caesar's inconsistent attitude where ill-omens were concerned was unproblematic for the Roman audience who created it, and for the authors who reported it – it was more important to preserve historical expectations intact than Caesar. The inadmissible mystery of how or why Caesar had not been sufficiently informed of his impending death had been laid to rest.

This is not to suggest that discussion about Caesar's murder then ground to a halt. On the contrary, attention was now focused on a safer mystery, one which helped to obscure the initial problem, and which could go unsolved without causing Romans to lose their religion: if Caesar knew what awaited him, why did he do nothing to avoid it? The liveliness of the resulting discussion bears witness to the

⁵² This is not to suggest that Caesar was necessarily adverse to heeding (or claiming) good omens; the tales of horn-blowing apparition which led him across the Rubicon, or his dream of raping his mother (interpreted as pointing to world-domination), for example, could have been spread by Caesar; see Linderski (n. 1), 34–6. However, authors do not agree upon the details of either of these events: Suetonius (*Iul.* 7) claims that the rape was dreamed of in Spain, while Plutarch (*Caes.* 32) says it was dreamed before crossing the Rubicon; Suetonius is the only author to report the apparition at the Rubicon (*Iul.* 32; cf. Plut. *Caes.* 32; App. *B. Civ.* 2.35; *Caes. B. Civ.* 1.8.1). These stories too may have sprung up in response to popular expectation. It is undeniable, however, that Caesar (who was Pontifex Maximus since 63 BC) made famous and self-promoting use of the other facets of religion, for example, the goddess Venus and her connection to the Julian clan.

⁵³ See Cic. *Div.* 2.52; Plut. *Caes.* 52.4–5, Luc. 5.395–6; Rawson (n. 2), 311.

⁵⁴ Val. Max. 8.11.2; Plut. *Caes.* 63; Suet. *Iul.* 81; Dio 44.18.

success of the revisions, and might itself be considered a sort of commentary on the new history of events. This question, a snag for the entire historical institution of death omens, had been dealt with variously in the past. Gaius Gracchus, for example, had ducked this uncomfortable glitch in his father's serpentine death omen by avowing that the snakes demanded someone's death, either his father's or his mother's, and his father had nobly sacrificed himself.⁵⁵ The Stoics, in the guise of Quintus Cicero, at least, explained that signs were sent so that a man would know his fate, not so that he could avoid it.⁵⁶ Velleius Paterculus (2.57.2) is willing to posit such an explanation for Caesar's death too, but others were less content to follow along. Various reasons were offered: spontaneous murder was precisely the sort of end Caesar wished for (and indeed, Caesar had prophesied his own sudden end at a dinner party just previous to his murder by asserting this); Caesar was in failing health and wished to be removed before causing himself embarrassment; Caesar was in denial of what he knew to be true; Caesar, weary of his armed guard, decided to play dare-devil and go unattended to the Senate that one fateful time; Caesar was shamed into ignoring his better judgement to stay home by Decimus Brutus.⁵⁷ Agreement about this issue was not necessary; it was enough that consensus about Caesar's foreknowledge had been achieved.

To conclude, Keith Hopkins observed that '[s]ober historians are interested primarily, sometimes exclusively, in the truth; they therefore usually ignore untrue stories,' but that '[i]n our attempts to find out what "really happened", we should be careful not to suppress what Romans thought was happening.'⁵⁸ Roman interpretations of the facts are often more significant than the facts themselves for our understanding of Roman history and society, and Roman stories about omens are a case in point. The consideration of Roman expectations of divination can begin to address the complaint which is often made about Roman history, that is, that it reads simply as the deeds of a few great men. Once we delve beneath the surface of historical narratives by contemplating issues such as divination, a topic which has been too often dismissed as peripheral to 'real' history, we discover that Roman history is something quite different. We are rewarded with a strong impression of non-élite cooperation, and

⁵⁵ Cic. *Div.* 1.36; Val. Max. 4.6.1; Plut. *Ti. Gracch.* 1.

⁵⁶ Cic. *Div.* 1.119; Suet. *Iul.* 59. Denyer (n. 29) defends Stoic logic.

⁵⁷ Suet. *Iul.* 86–7; Plut. *Caes.* 64; Dio 44.18.

⁵⁸ Hopkins (n. 2), 198, 233.

indeed, participation in the ideological systems which underlay Roman social and political structures. The shadowy popular majority demonstrates itself to be not a silent and uninterested audience of the deeds of famous men, but rather a vital agent in the creation of the collective memory which translates into what we call Roman history.